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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000705

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/01/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV PREF EMIN EAIR EAID MR

SUBJECT: MAURITANIA: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ROUNDUP FOR THE MONTH OF OCTOBER

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARK M. BOULWARE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (U) Summary: This month in Mauritania, President Aziz's government took important first steps towards fighting corruption while a poll financed by the World Bank found that 82.9 percent of Mauritians think the government is corrupt.

The Spanish and the French sent high level emissaries to Mauritania to strengthen security and cooperation and the European Union dispatched a mission to assess the post-election political situation. President Aziz traveled to France and Spain to meet with President Sarkozy and President Zapatero. The campaign for senatorial elections was launched and the majority party Union Pour la Republique (UPR) went through stormy moments. 14,955 refugees returned to Mauritania and the Ministry of Education reinstated 144 refugees to their former teaching positions. On the economic front, perspectives are positive in the mining and oil industry and food security might be better than expected.
End summary.

¶2. (U) The fight against corruption. On October 3, the government reacted promptly to the Aids Global Fund corruption scandal by arresting Dr. Abdallahi Ould Horma Ould Babana, the program's general director. Note: Babana is also Prime Minister Laghdaf's cousin. End note. The executive secretary and the administrative and financial director were also arrested. The GIRM has shown a willingness to make difficult short-term choices to reinstate Mauritania into the Global Fund and hosted a visiting Global Fund technical assistance team to help bring Mauritania's Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) into prescribed Global Fund operational and management standards. In mid-October, in an attempt to regain control over government official vehicles, the government announced that all missing official vehicles should be returned and that no official vehicles should circulate after 4:00 pm on weekdays. According to a poll published in March 2009 by the Secretary of State in Charge of the Administration's Modernization, 82.9 percent of Mauritians think the government is corrupt and 88.7 percent of those polled think that public administrators are lazy and negligent. Financed by the World Bank, the report focused on what citizens between 15-65 years of age think about the administration. 78.7 percent think that influence peddling is the country's worst form of corruption.

¶3. (U) Bilateral cooperation: France and Mauritania held bilateral security talks on October 5 that focused on terrorism, clandestine immigration and arms trafficking. On

October 5, Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos visited Nouakchott to enhance bilateral cooperation on the immigration, development and fishing fronts. French Chief of Defense General Georgelin visited Mauritania on October 11. President Aziz traveled to France on October 27 for his first official visit and met with President Sarkozy, Prime Minister Fillon, Minister of Foreign Affairs Kouchner and Secretary of State in charge of Cooperation Joyandet. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman stated the visit marks the normalization of relations between Paris and Nouakchott. Following his visit to France, President Aziz visited Spain on October 28 to meet with President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

¶4. (U) Senatorial elections: The campaign for one third of Mauritania's 56 senatorial seats was launched on October 23. Majority party UPR will present a common list with former opposition party Tawassoul. The opposition -- represented by the Front National pour la Defense de la Democratie (FNDD) and the Rassemblement des Forces Democratiques (RFD) -- will field separate lists.

¶5. (C) Human rights: On October 15, the Council of Ministers announced it will reinstate 144 refugees from Senegal and Mali to their teaching positions in the Ministry of Education. By October 26, 14,955 refugees had returned to Mauritania. Gulnara Shahinian, United Nations' special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, visited Mauritania from October 24 to November 4 to study actions taken by the government to end slavery. In a meeting with PolOff on October 30, Shahinian stated the slavery situation in Mauritania is dire and the government is paying lip service to the international community but lacks the

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political will to act. Nevertheless, Shahinian said she would abstain from drafting an overtly critical press release in order to encourage Aziz to fulfill his promises of improving Mauritania's record. Shahinian will deliver her report to the United Nations next year and will seek funding to implement the report's recommendations. On October 22, human rights group Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille highlighted the exploitation of young house servants in Mauritania and launched a campaign to adopt legislation protecting house servants. On October 20, the Mauritanian National Forum for Human Rights (FONADH), called for a census of all victims of the 1989 inter-ethnic violence in an effort to ensure that all victims get compensation.

¶6. (U) European Union and Commission visit Mauritania: A joint EU-EC mission visited Mauritania from 5-7 October to follow up on Article 96 of the Cotonou Accord. The mission was led by Swedish Ambassador and representative of the EU presidency Agneta Ellen Christina Bohman and the Chief of Unity to the General Development Direction of the European commission Filiberto Ceriani Sebregondi. The mission met with Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister as well as the opposition and civil society for consultations.

¶7. (U) Mauritania requests membership to Israeli boycott organizations: According to the press, Mauritanian authorities requested membership in organizations boycotting Israel. Recently, President Aziz declared in an interview with a Saudi journal that the decision to freeze relations with Israel was taken for "objective and clear reasons."

¶8. (U) Strife inside UPR: President Aziz' majority UPR party encountered divisions at its core when Senator and Senate Vice-President Mohcen El Hadj and four ministers boycotted an October 17 party gathering in Rkiz (Trarza region). According to the press, these individuals were suspended from the party. Party president Mahmoud Ould Mohamed Lemine denied these rumors on October 21.

¶9. (U) Officers arrested: On October 25, press announced the arrest of two military officers, including Seyidna Oumar Ould Elemine, a member of the presidential military staff. Rumor has it they were arrested for planning a coup d'etat but they were officially accused of arms trafficking. Elemine denied accusations that he had trafficked weapons missing from a military storage facility.

¶10. (U) Syrian Ba'ath party visit: A delegation from the

Syrian Ba'ath Socialist Party arrived in Nouakchott on October 26 for a five-day visit. According to Deputy Secretary General Abdalla El Ahmar, the visit responds to an invitation from ruling party UPR.

¶11. (U) Total commences first on-shore drilling project: French energy company Total began the first on-shore drilling program in Mauritania. Despite excitement about the development, Total has cautioned that if commercial quantities of oil are found, it will be 2015 at earliest before full-scale production could begin. A spokesperson for Total also noted that there is only a 10 percent chance the first drilling will result in commercially viable quantities of hydrocarbons.

¶12. (U) Positive news in the mining sector: While petroleum output has declined consistently over previous quarters, there has recently been encouraging news from many of the international firms mining for gold and uranium in Mauritania. Tasiast (owned by Canadian firm Red Back Mining) announced that it expects 2009 gold production in Mauritanian to increase 53 percent over 2008 levels. Forte Energy, an Australian based company also publicly announced encouraging 2009 results from its uranium mining operations in Mauritania.

¶13. (U) International aid to promote greater food security: The International Fund for Agricultural Development announced a USD six million loan and USD six million grant to help Mauritania obtain greater food security by minimizing dependence on food imports. Nearly 70 percent of Mauritania's food is currently imported. The program is meant to increase the value of Mauritania's domestic food products by encouraging more in-country value-added processing so that Mauritania food products can receive higher prices on international markets.

¶14. (U) Better than expected food security prediction: The USAID-sponsored Famine Early Warning Systems Network released their assessment of food security conditions in Mauritania

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for the last months of 2009 and 2010. Due to an abundance of rain and higher than expected prices for agricultural output, the harvest season of October-December is expected to be normal/good and livestock production is expected to be better than average.

¶15. (U) Growth of Mauritania Airways: On the second anniversary of the founding of Mauritania Airways (a private company 51% owned by TUNISAIR, 39% owned by a Mauritanian partner and 10% owned by the Mauritanian government), the Director General announced that the company is in discussions to purchase two new Boeing 737-700 aircraft. EconOff had earlier helped Mauritania Airways get in contact with FCS to facilitate contacts with Boeing. Mauritania Airways has increased its regional market share during the reorganization of regional competitor Air Senegal and announced seven new intra-African flights to begin in 2010.

BOULWARE